

# *Calvinism and the Mass Media*

By Trudy Murphy

Since I have chosen to write on Calvinist beliefs pertaining to the means of communication that reach and influence large numbers of people (especially literature, music, art, and television), I should state my familiarity with the subject of Calvinism. I was raised in a family and environment where the Calvinistic way of life was adhered to very strictly. My father is a Calvinist theologian who obtained his degree in 1940 at the University of Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and has lectured, written books and served as an ordained minister in the Gereformeerde Gemeente (The Netherlands Reformed Church) in Holland, The United States and Canada. This does not make me an authority on the subject; however, it should throw some light on my choice of this topic. In order to understand the reasons why the Calvinists have a certain attitude towards the mass media, it is necessary to look at their historical and cultural background. What I propose to do is to examine (a) the historical aspects; (b) the cultural aspects; (c) the Calvinist's views on the mass media; and (d) make some comparative analysis between the validity of the Calvinist theory and the theories of some present day researchers in the field of communication.

Another point should be made before I begin with the historical background of Calvinism. Since I was raised in Holland, I will be focusing most of my attention on the theories which apply to the Dutch Calvinists, and the groups that exist in North America whose background is Dutch. There can be some substantial differences in practices depending on which country the study is being made, therefore, in order to simplify the study, I will deal with the Dutch Gereformeerden traditions and practices and will refer to it by their English name, The Netherlands Reformed Calvinists.

The reform movement in the Netherlands began long before Martin Luther in such movements as The Brethren of the Common Life.<sup>1</sup> The Dutch Calvinist Church was the source of able

theological work and became a very influential centre of Reformed thought in the late 16th and 17th centuries. The typical distinguishing trait of the Netherlands Reformed Calvinist is their emphatic devotion to Scripture and a rigorous striving to practice God's word in daily life. Their theology puts a heavy accent upon sin and reprobation, and from this they derive a stern morality dictating strict obedience to biblical demands, such as Sunday observance.

In its overall effect upon social and cultural participation, religion is of the utmost importance in Holland. Wherever the Calvinists set up a community, it also established schools alongside the churches. This was not only to teach the Bible, but also to teach a whole range of other subjects. Furthermore, they have always been careful in the historical study of the sources of faith, especially the Bible. John Calvin, the leader of the Calvinist movement, states that

*because it is only possible to profit from such lectures if first one is instructed in the languages and humanities, and also because it is necessary to raise offspring for time to come, in order not to leave the Church deserted to our children, a college should be instituted for instructing children to prepare them for the minstry as well as for civil government.<sup>2</sup>*

*Believe In Power  
Of The Word, But  
Not In Pictures  
Or Sculptures*

Therefore, one may receive the most extensive higher education without ever leaving his/her own religious influence. This thorough training which is instilled upon the young members of the church also carries over into adulthood. The choice of political parties, entertainment, leisure associations, etc., all follow the principle of the Calvinist traditions, and are kept alive in this manner. Given the relative insularity of the religious community, it is a small wonder that religious ties tend to follow traditional lines. In a study done in Sassenheim, South Holland, it was found that more than 80% of the respondents appeared to belong to the same church as their fathers' fathers.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between the Netherlands Reformed tradition and culture is complex. From the beginning, the Reformed tradition rejected paintings and sculptures as means of Christian education or as aids to worship. They are convinced in the power of the word, and they believed they saw the corruption that reliance on images had produced. In other words, images and paintings cannot communicate the faith. According to Zwingli, a reformer in the 1500's:

*The story must be learned only from the Word, and from the painting one learns nothing except the form of the body, the movements or the constitution of the body or face.*<sup>4</sup>

John Calvin himself did not give much attention to the visual arts. He did not believe that they were effective instruments in communicating the Gospel, therefore not necessary. He did believe that the visual arts were gifts of God and therefore should be used in pure and legitimate ways.

*Art must not be perverted by misuse or turned to the destruction of the human.*<sup>5</sup>

Calvin was not convinced that art is an effective medium of communication and teaching. He preferred the spoken and written word. The content of art was too ambiguous and too subject to personal interpretation.

Literature as a form of communication was used by the Calvinists from the beginning since they prized and cultivated the power of words to express and communicate their faith. The primary focus of the literary activity in the Calvinist community is found in theological writings. Two works that were produced in the Reformed Calvinist context, and are still read and well known today, are John Milton's (1608-1674) Paradise Lost and John Bunyans' (1628-1688) Pilgrims' Progress.

*Melody With  
Bad Words  
Hits The Heart*

Calvin and Zwingli both took music with utmost seriousness. As a consequence, Zwingli eliminated it from the worship of the church and Calvin provided strict guidelines for its use. Calvin appreciated music as a gift of God, but knew that music had a

*secret and almost incredible power to move the human heart. When melody goes with it, every bad word penetrates much more deeply into the heart.*<sup>6</sup>

Calvin advocated congregational singing under the guidelines that the music and words of the song be appropriate to worship and that the music should not obscure the words. As a result, Calvin sponsored the publishing of a Psalter that turned the Psalms into verse and set them to music. Emile Doumergue described the great usefulness of the Psalter in the following words:

*The same year of its publication saw 25 editions of it issued. In four years, 62 editions followed. The bibliographers*

tell us of 1400 editions. The Calvinist Psalter was translated into English, German, Dutch, Danish, Polish, Latin, Italian, Spanish, Hebrew and more. In less than two centuries there issued in Holland alone more than 30 editions.<sup>7</sup>

The Psalter is an expression of the Calvinists faith, and is still used in their services today.

The Calvinist tradition has been a very verbal religion with great confidence in spoken and written words to communicate thought, emotion and intention. Critics of contemporary culture have warned of the declining power of words and have emphasized the effectiveness of new forms of communication such as television and movies.<sup>8</sup> If these critics are correct in their assessment, the Calvinist tradition is bereft of a traditional power. There is not yet convincing evidence that words, either written or spoken, have lost their power. Language still ranks as one of the highest and most significant human achievements.

*It [language] may be supplemented, but it cannot be supplanted without impoverishing the human spirit.<sup>9</sup>*

It is clear that the Calvinist tradition with its emphasis on words has produced a pattern of life that has liberated the highest powers of human personality; reason in the service of God, the capacity to think and act for oneself, and the capacity for self-criticism. However, the focus of the Calvinist emphasis on the word is preaching. Critics of preaching have announced its declining importance.<sup>10</sup> The predictions have not come true since it is a significant fact that millions of people each week leave their homes, rest and recreation to worship and to hear a sermon. It can be duplicated neither by sports, entertainment, politics nor business. The only possible rival to preaching is television since it does not require a communal gathering. For this and many other reasons, the Calvinists have banned television from their homes and lives.

*TV Has Power  
But Preaching  
Is Communal*

So far, I have attempted to portray and interpret the branch of Protestantism that has made an impact on the lives of people in society. The question could be asked whether Calvinism still has its influence and powers in the present tense. The answer is "yes", even though the number of members have declined somewhat in the 20th century. According to Benjamin B. Warfield,

*There are very likely less Calvinists in the world today than ever before.<sup>11</sup>*

*Group Dynamic  
Make It Easier  
To Manipulate*

This statement was made since he found extremely few of them whom he could regard as true to the type, and basically finding the true Calvinists to reside in Holland. The tradition still lives on, but sometimes lacks, according to John McNeil:

*the rigor of the old-fashioned discipline which was marked by a paternal supervision of the peoples daily lives. Legal controls have been for the most part, lightened, and to some extent, the mores are being changed; but it can hardly be argued that present-day morality among members of the Calvinist churches suffers by comparison with that of a century or more ago.*<sup>12</sup>

A life rationally ordered by moral and theological commitments has been a mark of the Calvinist tradition from the beginning. Many factors in contemporary culture conspire to undercut personal responsibility and personal discipline. A new naturalism has emphasized spontaneity partly in reaction to overly rationalized and disciplined lives that quenched all spontaneity and naturalness.<sup>13</sup> Techniques of group dynamics make it much easier to manipulate people today than previously, and communities have new ways of destroying privacy and individuality. The pervasiveness of mass media in society makes it possible to mass produce personalities in ways that were formerly impossible. As T.W. Adorno states in his article "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture":

*The repetitiveness, the self-sameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of the individual resistance.*<sup>14</sup>

The Calvinists are not against technology per se, but are fighting against the powers of the men who control this technology and to what use they put it. **Technology is a** thing which can raise those who use it to greatness and power over the masses, which, according to Helmut Thieliche

*can even become for a man a citadel against God. And as soon as the responsible engineer, "man", allows this to happen, or as soon as he does this with the help of technology (for technology is not evil in itself), he surrenders to the evil one and put both himself and his technical means into Satan's hand.*<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, if the means are not to serve God, they are the wrong means. Since the Calvinists are stern believers in simplicity, devotion, discipline, togetherness, verbal com-

munication and living their lives only to serve the Scriptures and their fellow man, television is not in accord with what they believe.

An attempt should be made to analyze whether the Calvinists are justified in their response to some aspects of the mass media. Much research has been done over the past few years in regard to the effects of the mass media, particularly television. Since the responses to television are varied, I will try to show both positive and negative aspects of television with the aid of research that has been published to date.

Marshall McLuhan states that the key to television is its power to change the ways in which human beings think about themselves and their relation to the world they live in. He also sees television as a persuasive power which can change our ideas and ways in which we choose to appear.

*The TV extension of our nerves in hirsute pattern possesses the power to evoke a flood of related imagery in clothing, hairdo, walk and gesture.<sup>16</sup>*

McLuhan Shows  
Power of Fads,  
Styles, Songs

As a result, McLuhan sees the development of the Global Village. Through electronic images, we now see and hear what is going on everywhere in the world within moments of its occurrence. There is much truth in McLuhan's assertion since fads, styles and even popular songs once took months or even years to spread across the world, but they are now rapidly transmitted.

Leo Bogart in his book The Age of Television, gives his point of view regarding television. He is concerned with all the aspects of television, not just the cultural. His arguments are backed up with much statistical data that has been recorded previous to his study, and he also includes surveys of radio and newspaper influences. He suggests that television cannot be seen as the single influential factor.

*In its brief history, television has become the American people's most important source of ideas. It has changed the position of the other mass media, and profoundly affected the way in which we spend our time with our families and outside the home. Yet, television has wrought no violent revolution. It has not destroyed conversation, it has not converted Americans from an active people into a passive one; its psychological effects on the young have not always been for the best, but at the same time, it has not produced a generation of delinquents.<sup>17</sup>*

Therefore, television can do many things. What it does do depends on a host of surrounding factors.

The Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry (Ontario) has submitted a report pertaining to some bad aspects of the communication industry. The Commission was established in order to gauge how much violence is projected in television, newspapers, film, books, live theatre, music and radio. Their task was to answer the following questions.

*Do they (television, radio, music, etc.) give us too much violence, How much is too much, What harm is there, if any, in too much violence?*<sup>18</sup>

Since 96% of Canadian homes have television sets,<sup>19</sup> the images of reality that are portrayed are of utmost importance. According to the Commission, there has been a decline in the influence of previously powerful institutions such as the church, school and family. The communications industry has taken over part of these functions, and plays a significant role in shaping values, attitudes, behaviour and lifestyles. The Commission's studies confirmed that violence routinely predominates in entertainment television, films, news, contemporary literature, magazines and even categories of popular music. In other words, violence is a staple ingredient of media productions.<sup>20</sup> The example cited for violence in music was as follows:

*He would slash his grannie's face up given half the chance;  
He would sell you back the pieces all for less than half a quid;  
He thought he was the meanest until he met up with Savage Sid;  
Now Sidney was a greaser with some nasty roots;  
He poured a pint of guinness over Benny's boots;  
Benny looked at Sydney; Sidney stared right back in the eye;  
Sidney chose a switch blade and Benny got a cold meat pie;  
Oh what a terrible sight, much to the people's delight-  
one hell of a sight.*<sup>21</sup>

It could be noted here that John Calvin had an insight into the power of musical influences when he stated "*when melody goes with it, every bad word penetrates much more deeply into the heart*". (as quoted on page 5).

Professor Gregory Fouts, one of the many researchers who prepared a study for the Royal Commission on Violence,

recently had an article published in the T.V. Guide (Feb. 18/78 edition) which was titled "Now For Some Good News About Television". Professor Fouts now believes that it's too easy, and unfair, to consider television as a catch-all scapegoat for society's ills. He states that:

*If we had television 100 years ago, we wouldn't have the problems we have, because TV also coincided with the decrease in the extended family and the decrease in parental responsibility with their kids. It came along at the wrong time.*<sup>22</sup>

He also expresses his concern for children who grow up without television, indicating that:

*Pity The Poor  
Child That Is  
Without TV*

*They [children without TV] will be regarded as different; their parents would view them as precocious; and would stand the chance of being rejected because they see themselves as above the other kids. They may be, in terms of factual knowledge, but I don't think they are spontaneous in their play.*<sup>23</sup>

Fouts makes numerous generalizations about the behaviour of children who do not grow up with television, but does not back up his statements with any concrete data. They "may" be above other children in factual knowledge, and they "may" be less spontaneous in their playing than children who watch TV. Fouts had studied children who were television watchers, not non-watchers, therefore, his generalizations are not convincing. He concludes with the statement that the children who do not have this element of entertainment to share with others are more likely to have socialization problems.

McLuhan, Bogart, The Royal Commission, Professor Fouts and Calvinists all have varied approaches and attitudes towards the mass media. With Calvinism, they have one view - a negative one. McLuhan states that television has the power to change the way people think, therefore an educational tool. The Calvinists would view it as an instrument that has the power to impose on and alter their religious ideas and traditions. Most shows are not devoted to the Scriptures, and the Calvinist's stern beliefs in morality would be threatened if their young were to watch shows where premarital sex or infidelity are portrayed. On television, it is not necessary to put a man and woman into bed to introduce a sexual suggestion, nor is it necessary actually to speak an obscenity in order to put across its sense.

Bogart stated that television had become for the



American people the most important source of ideas. The Calvinists would retort by saying that the Scriptures are the most important source, and none other. If their members were to watch television in order to educate themselves on matters which are fictional, their time for research of the Scriptures would be curtailed.

The Royal Commission on Violence discovered through research that television had created a decline in the influence of the church, school and family. These three institutions are the framework for the Calvinist tradition and faith, and a decline would signify the erosion of their faith and way of life. The church is foremost; the schools which they institute themselves in order to instruct the young, second; and the family is the tie which holds all three institutions together. Therefore, if what the Commission states is accurate, this would give the Calvinists even more reason to reject television.

Professor Fouts' argument that television is a necessity in order to socialize, and for the sake of not to be classified as being "different", did not impress me as being a valid assessment of why television is useful and necessary. According to Society Today, the agents of socialization for children and adults are very different. The family clearly is the group most responsible for teaching children basic social roles, values, attitudes and motivation.<sup>24</sup> Fouts also claims television to be an important educational tool. The Calvinists believe verbal communication and literature to be the primary tools. Since the parents and teachers can proofread literature before distributing it, they find it a safer means of educating their audience. The editing of shows on television by the parents is not possible since previews of what is to be shown so that parents can choose whether the child can watch, is not available. The only way the parents can estimate what is to be shown is according to the description in the TV Guide or knowledge of the show due to previous episodes. The chances that a child will watch a programme that is not suited for his/her viewing is greater than the chances a child would read a book which is not suited for him/her, since reading material can be checked beforehand.

*Parents Can Proof  
Read Literature  
But Not TV*

Each of the contrasting views that I have illustrated have their own merit. Depending on what a person wants in life, how one has been raised, and how one chooses to view television, all boils down to personal preferences. To state that the Calvinists or McLuhan, Bogart and Prof. Fouts are wrong would not be justified either. The importance is that each viewpoint can be illustrated and studied within its own context.

# FOOTNOTES

1. A more detailed description of this movement can be found in "A Study of the Disputes in Dutch Calvinism from 1600-1650" by D. Nobbs, published by The University Press, Cambridge, England, 1938.
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3. Gadourek, I., "A Dutch Community", 2nd edition, published by J.B. Wolters, Groningen, The Netherlands, 1961. pp. 97-100.
4. Garside, C., "Zwingli and the Arts" published by Yale University Press, New Haven, 1966. pp. 172-173.
5. Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. XX, XXI, LCC, ed. by J.T. McNeil, published by Westminster Press, New York, 1954. p. 112.
6. Strunk, O., ed. "Preface to the Psalter-Opera Selecta", published by W.W. Norton Co., New York, 1950. p. 12.
7. Dounergue, E., "Music in the Works of Calvin", article in the Princeton Theological Review, Vol. 7, No. 4, October 1969. p. 529.
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9. Pei, M.A., "The Story of Language", rev. ed., published by W.W. Norton Co., New York, 1953. p. 199.
10. See T. Wedel's article "Is Preaching Outmoded?" in Religion in Life, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Aug. 1965) pp. 534-547 and D. Browning's article "Should Preaching be Abolished?" in Encounter, (Winter, 1974) pp. 1-7.
11. Warfield, B.B., "Calvin and Calvinism" published by The Westminster Press, New York, 1931. p. 217.
12. McNeil, J., "The History and Character of Calvinism", published by the Exford University Press, New York, 1962. p. 427.
13. See D. Yankelovich's article "The New Naturalism" in the Saturday Review, (April, 1972). pp. 32-37.
14. Adorno, T.W., "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture", an essay published in "Television; The Critical View", ed. by H. Newcomb, published by Oxford University Press, 1977. p. 242.
15. Thielich, H., "Between God and Satan" published by B. Eerdsman Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1958. pp. 59-60.
16. McLuhan, M., Ibid. Understanding Media, p. 328
17. Bogart, L., "The Age of Television" published by Frederick Ungar, New York, 1956. pp. 331-332.
18. "The Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Study" published in 1976. p. 2.
19. Ibid., p. 6.
20. Ibid., p. 21.
21. Ibid., p. 40.
22. TV Guide, Vol. 2, No. 7 (Feb. 18/78) Issue No. 60, p. 3.
23. Ibid., TV Guide, p. 5.
24. Emblen, R. "Society Today" (second edition) published by CRM Books, Del Mar, California, 1973. p. 164.

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